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ABSTRACT

As the integration of language and literature across the curriculum builds, educators have come to believe worthwhile literature is embedded in universal themes (such as making decisions, facing challenges, and working together) that are common to the human condition. These themes transcend subject areas by providing natural frameworks for unifying the curriculum. Universal themes are powerful catalysts for lifelong learning because they address what is at the core of humanity. A class of fourth graders demonstrated that the active involvement, collaboration, and personal investment in their own learning arising out of a discussion of the universal theme of perseverance is possible for students of all ages and abilities. Six traits are characteristic of universal themes and are helpful in considering possible themes for study: concept, catalyst, connection, content, context, and curriculum. An important criterion for developing meaningful thematic instruction is to select themes that go beyond narrow topics. Selecting appropriate universal themes to develop involves: considering concepts children need to learn; finding natural connections to chose a theme; and searching for universal themes embedded in literature already being used. Planning a universal theme unit is a developmental process similar to the reading and writing process and comprises three stages: discovering and "themestorming"; making decisions about major learning processes to incorporate; and experiencing the process of teaching and learning. (RS)

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LITERACY IMPROVEMENT SERIES
FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATORS

ED 365 951

Learning for Life
Through Universal Themes

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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"A child is a candle to be lit, not a cup to be filled."

—Plutarch, 46-120 A.D.

Imagine a classroom of typical fourth graders enthusiastically engaged in discussing, reading and writing about how people, including themselves, persevere. The following excerpts are taken from the unedited journal entries of children who represent a range of cultural backgrounds, experiences and abilities.

> "One day I persevered by reading a book with two hundred and some (pages) in less time than it takes to watch the program."
>
> —Wes Kennedy

> "When I was about eight years old I got on a skate board and tried to ride it. I fell off and cut my chin real bad. I kept trying and kept falling off but know I can ride a skate board. Not really good, but good."
>
> —Star Cheatwood

After writing extensively about how he persevered in passing his fitness test and in playing baseball and basket ball, Robert concludes...

> "I persevered in everything I played and did. Like an example of this, I have rote very much. I can't wait for next year as I persevere."
>
> —Robert Bravato

These children are engaged in a lifelong learning event around the universal theme of Perseverance. This event, in actuality, began when they were born. It has become the catalyst for learning in their fourth grade class and it will continue throughout their lives because the quality of perseverance is an essential element of human growth and maturity. The students' enthusiasm and natural involvement in this event represent authentic learning at its best, learning that is connected to their real life issues and experiences.

Fortunately, educators throughout the world have begun to realize that we cannot teach anything of value by separating the facets of our lives, that we must address the whole individual—feelings, attitudes, concepts, beliefs and experiences. Educators such as Don Holdoway in New Zealand, Briane Cambourne in Australia, Jane Baskwell in Canada, and Donald Graves in the United States have

discovered more meaningful approaches to teaching and learning, approaches that consider learning processes, that is, *how* children learn in connection with *who* they are. They no longer view the curriculum as a separate content one imposes on the child, but rather as a shared process of learning based on each child's development, experiences, interests, and abilities. Reading and writing, for example, are not taught as a series of discrete skills to be mastered in a predetermined learning sequence separated from the child's development and background experiences. They have discovered that reading and writing are processes themselves which develop best in situations where literacy is purposeful and meaningful to the child. These educators have accepted the challenge of making reading and writing meaningful by having children write about their own experiences and read "real" literature.

Over the years in my various roles as a classroom teacher, reading/writing specialist, curriculum writer and educational consultant, I've worked with many teachers who have accepted the challenge of making learning authentic and meaningful for their students. They are looking at their curriculum critically and asking themselves, "Is this worthy of my students? Will it ignite their interests, engage their minds and foster high level thinking and learning?"

Teachers are continually searching for and trying out instructional strategies that open doors to learning for all children, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities.

When teachers begin to ask these questions, they, too, are involved in authentic teaching and learning. These questions and the changes that may result are at the core of an educational reform movement that is sweeping over our world, classroom by classroom. In some areas, changes towards authentic life-long literacy learning are comprehensive, affecting every area of the curriculum. Teachers are involved in reading and discussing classroom-based research about how children learn best. They are continually searching for and trying out instructional strategies that open doors to learning for all children, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. They are eager and willing to test the research in their own classrooms and realize the results with

their students. These teachers actively pursue staff development opportunities and seek out other teachers involved in the same process of growth and discovery.

In many schools, however, changes are taking place more slowly. In these schools, a few teachers may decide to put aside watered-down textbooks, workbooks and endless stacks of fill-in-the-blank dittos. As they begin to delve into real books and authentic learning experiences with their students, a transformation begins to take place. Sometimes, that transformation begins with one book, one powerful piece of literature that strikes a cord in teachers and students alike. Then one book leads to others and soon literature, not basal textbooks, becomes the core of the curriculum. As both teachers and students immerse themselves in reading high-quality literature, they discover that not only can literature be used as the core of the reading/language arts curriculum, but it can also be used to teach content areas such as social studies, science, and art. Move over textbooks! Here come books like Jane Yolen's *Encounter* to enlighten us about the story of Columbus' arrival in the Americas through the eyes of a native Taino boy. Teachers are also discovering how to teach reading, writing and language processes across the curriculum. The integration of language processes into the content areas makes sense to teachers and students alike because it improves language skills, enhances content learning and saves *time* as well. Now that's a real discovery!

Universal Themes Foster Lifelong Learning

As the integration of language and literature across the curriculum builds, we experience another significant insight, one that affects both the internal and external realm of learning: Worthwhile literature, whether nonfiction, fiction or poetry, is about life itself. It is embedded with universal themes that are common to the human condition—themes such as Perseverance, Undergoing Changes, or People Who Make a Difference. Such global themes defy departmentalization. They transcend subject areas by providing natural frameworks for unifying the curriculum. They can become windows of learning whereby students perceive connections among themselves, their education and their world. Universal themes are powerful catalysts for lifelong learning because they address what's

at the core of humanity—the concepts and values of what we need to know in order to exist. In preparing students to understand the meaning underlying the theme of Perseverance, I shared with them a true article from *Newsweek* magazine about a five-year-old boy named Rocky Lyon who loved hearing *The Little Engine That Could* read to him again and again (*Newsweek*, July 1988). Little did his parents realize what an impact this simple children's book would have on their lives. While driving home one day with Rocky asleep beside her, Mrs. Lyons hit a huge pothole and her truck flipped over into a forty-foot ravine. She was badly injured and told her son to get out of the truck because she thought it might explode. At first, the boy obeyed, but then he scrambled back to pull his mother free. He began to push her up the steep slope with all the strength his 4-foot, 55-pound frame would allow. Halfway up the bank, she told him she could not go on. Rocky replied, "Oh Mom, think of the little train: 'I think I can, I think I can.' " Because of her son's "perseverance," they finally crawled to the highway where a passing car took them to the hospital. Two broken shoulders and 70 stitches later, Mrs. Lyons is convinced that she owes her life to her son and to a simple children's story with a powerful message: "I think I can. I think I can."

Not only can children, even five-year-olds, understand universal themes and concepts in literature, but they will also apply them to their lives, given the opportunity.

This story has a powerful message for adults as well: Not only can children, even five-year-olds, understand universal themes and concepts in literature, but they will also apply them to their lives, given the opportunity. This kind of transfer is the ultimate objective and reflects the highest level of learning.

Our fourth grade students responded to this article with intense interest and identification. Their classroom teacher had read *The Little Engine That Could* aloud the first day of school in order to make a point. "I think I can, I think I can" was printed in large black letters on his classroom wall to remind students to believe in

themselves and keep on trying. So when I shared with them Rocky Lyon's story, they understood it fully.

Following the news story, we discussed the meaning of "I think I can" which led us to the concept of Perseverance. I asked students to explain the meaning of perseverance in their own words. Then we began to make some personal connection to our own lives by sharing times we had persevered and by listing people we knew who had demonstrated perseverance in their lives. The class chart on the next page was recorded with these students as they brainstormed their ideas.

These responses reveal that children naturally integrate what they learn. They don't separate learning into different departments, but, rather, fuse knowledge under meaningful concepts.

As I recorded some of their responses on the large class chart, students continued to write many more of their ideas on individual charts which they shared with their classmates in cooperative groups. Later, students would use their charts as resources for journal writing. They also took their charts home and talked to their families about specific ways they had "persevered." The theme now had meaning for students because they identified with it and because it had extended beyond the classroom door into their lives. Up to this point, students had been actively engaged in making meaning of the theme through prewriting and oral sharing, both in and out of the classroom. Although it was my intention to have students select one idea from their charts to write about in their journals, I had not asked them to do so yet. After sharing his chart with his family and recording their ideas, Minh, one of our students, eagerly returned the next day not only with his chart full of responses, but also with three different written compositions about how he and his family had persevered. The unedited first draft of one of his pieces, printed below, is evidence of Minh's firsthand experience with Perseverance and reveals the power of a universal theme in generating real writing.

Children don't separate learning into different departments, but, rather, fuse knowledge under meaningful concepts.

Perseverance

What does "Perseverance" mean to you?	Who do you know who has persevered?	How have they persevered?
Try hard, never give up.	Jim Abbot	He played major league baseball with one arm.
Think positive. Use strategies.	Helen Keller	She wrote books even though she was deaf and blind.
Don't stop until the job is done.	Mr. Weakly (their teacher)	He lived through the Vietnam War.
Give yourself support. Keep trying until you have it. Use what you know to solve your problem or meet your goal.	Mahatma Gandhi	He tried to stop violence in the world by setting a good example.
	John F. Kennedy	He started the Peace Corps because he cared about people.
	Magic Johnson	He played in the NBA All Star game with HIV virus.
Don't quit.	Albert Einstein	He was kicked out of school but later solved math problems that no one else could.
	Jake Docktor (a classmate)	He keeps on trying and improving in math, reading, commenting and questioning.

I persevered by trying to beat my own time for the mile run. My P.E. teacher told me that a nine year old boy is supposed to get a 7.57. So I told my parents to bring me down to the high school to practice for the mile run. They took me down. At first I got a 9:41, then a 8:48, 8:36, 8:12, back to 8:18, and back to 8:12, down to 7.55, back to 8:01, 8:04, and back to 8:00. The next day was the test. My dad said, "Son, I bet you can get 7:56." The next day my class walked to the high school. During the walk, I asked him (his teacher), "What is the time for the mile run?" "Well, it says on my list that a nine year old boy is supposed to get a 8:31." Inside I was saying, "You're gonnah make it." The mile run started. I was on the last lap and my teacher said, "Speed it up Minh, it's your last lap." I ran as fast as I could saying, "This is for you Dad," over and over. I passed the line and my teacher said, "7:37." Then my heart filled with joy. Even my family did so.

—Minh Luu

At this point, the children were keenly involved in a "lifelong learning event." Their involvement had developed at many levels—personally, socially, emotionally and educationally. They were listening to the news and bringing in news articles that illustrated perseverance in real people's lives. They were writing about ways they and their families were persevering. In social studies, they were learning about how the early settlers and pioneers persevered, and in science, how inventors, doctors and astronauts persevere.

Students were also reading *Stone Fox* by John Reynolds Gardiner, a Rocky Mountain legend about a boy named Little Willy who is determined to save his Grandpa's farm by winning a dog sled race against Stone Fox, a powerfully built Indian who has never lost the race. As the children read this remarkable story and responded by writing in their journals, they continually made connections to the theme by comparing the characters' ways of persevering to their own experiences. Even reluctant readers delved into the book with enthusiasm, striving to read, understand, and voice their opinions. As they met in literature circles to compare notes and journal responses, they gained new insights into characters and events. After reading the story, groups collaborated by designing *Stone Fox* story murals where they used what they had learned in a verbal and visual way. Students had to evaluate their journal entries and literature logs in order to select pieces to display and publish on their murals. They collaborated, revised and

peer edited written responses that were most significant to them and combined them with attractive visuals. One mural included a map sketched by a student of the dog sled race in the story, a published map of the Iditarod from Juneau to Fairbanks, Alaska, word clusters of character traits, a sketch of *Stone Fox* based on the verbal description and a written character sketch of grandpa in the novel. Cooperative learning, collaboration and active involvement became necessary ingredients for all students in their desire to communicate and celebrate their learning.

The active involvement, collaboration and personal investment in their own learning that these fourth graders experienced is possible for students of all ages and abilities. To create the environment and the opportunity for real life learning, we must first understand what a universal theme is and is not. First, it is *not* a topic. Topics such as bears, pigs, colors, dinosaurs, animals and pioneers are often the subjects of thematic instructional materials. Universal themes go beyond topics but may also include them as subcategories. For example, the Perseverance theme might include pioneers as part of the social studies curriculum. What better way to understand and learn how pioneers persevered. Not only are students learning facts about pioneers, but they are also learning essential qualities of humankind. By understanding what perseverance means and how it relates to their own lives, students are better able to comprehend the ordeal pioneers experienced. Thus, Perseverance becomes the "personal connection" between the pioneers and the students.

Cooperative learning, collaboration and active involvement became necessary ingredients for all students in their desire to communicate and celebrate their learning.

To apply universal themes to learning and instruction, we must *think beyond* narrowly defined topics, beyond the bits and pieces of instruction that tend to dominate the day. Instead, think in terms of *concepts* that will affect students throughout their lives.

I have found the following six traits to be characteristic of universal themes and helpful in considering possible themes for study.

Characteristics of Universal Themes

Concept: A universal theme is a concept that defines a common human condition, quality or experience which connects all people regardless of age, race, gender, experience, ability or cultural heritage.

Catalyst: Universal themes function as catalysts for lifelong learning both in and out of the classroom.

Connection: They foster powerful personal connections between students and between learner and content. They also promote holistic learning in which attitudes, values, personal experiences, prior knowledge, concepts and learning processes interact.

Content: They provide a focus for in-depth learning experiences that enhance content learning, conceptual development and higher order thinking.

Context: They promote the development of literacy skills and interactive learning in meaningful contexts.

Curriculum: Universal themes unify the curriculum through a natural integration of literature, language processes, and content area learning.

In her book *Invitations*, Regie Routman explains some common misconceptions about thematic instruction:

> Unfortunately, many of the thematic units teachers buy and create are nothing more than suggested activities clustered around a central focus or topic. The units incorporate some elements of math, science, social studies, art and music, but there is often little or no development of important ideas. This is correlation, not integration. With integration, the relationships among the disciplines or subject areas are meaningful and natural. Concepts identified are not only related to the topic or subject but are important to them. With correlation, the connections are superficial and forced, and there is no important concept development. . . I believe that we need to be investing most of our time in con-

scious, deliberate, thoughtful topics and themes that go beyond the literal level. (1991, p. 277)

Routman reminds us to think beyond the superficial, make the connections count and the experiences meaningful for students. She emphasizes that a theme unit need not connect *all* areas of the curriculum nor occupy every moment of the day. This is putting ourselves and our students in proverbial straight-jackets. The primary purpose of designing instruction under the umbrella of universal themes is not to confine but to liberate the mind to think on a higher plane, one that encompasses creative and critical thinking and incorporates life experiences. Neither should the theme be another add-on to the curriculum. Rather, it should evolve naturally as a result of student needs and content to be learned. According to Routman:

> A thematic unit is an integrated unit only when the topic or theme is meaningful, relevant to the curriculum and students' lives, consistent with whole language principles, and authentic in the interrelationship of the language processes. When planning thematic units, interdisciplinary connections across the different subject areas are not necessary for integration to be occurring. (1991, p. 277)

Making Meaningful Natural Connections

How do we make natural connections between literature, content learning and students' lives? Any worthwhile piece of literature is embedded with universal themes. These themes provide powerful connections between reader and text. However, if we become too engrossed in the superficial topics and in the literal details of what happened, who did what to whom and in what order, it is possible to overlook the most important concepts. A case in point is Frank Asch's predictable story *Just Like Daddy*. It goes like this:

> When I got up this morning
> I yawned a big yawn...Just like Daddy.
> I washed my face, got dressed,
> and had a big breakfast...Just like Daddy.
> Then I put on my coat

and my boots...Just like Daddy.
And we all went fishing.
On the way I picked a flower
and gave it to my mother...Just like Daddy.
When we got to the lake,
I put a big worm on my hook...Just like Daddy.
All day we fished and fished,
and I caught a big fish...Just like Mommy.

Often, teachers will use this book in their theme unit on bears. Although bears are not mentioned in the text, the illustrated characters are bears; but what's the major concept in the story—the universal theme? Things we like to do...Just like Daddy? This can be problematic for a child who doesn't have a daddy at home. We need to think beyond the obvious, to discover the major concept. All children imitate grownups in some way, including daddies, mommies, siblings, friends, or grandparents. Thus, the universal theme and key concept that children and adults have in common is: things we like to do...just like someone else. All children can identify with and comprehend this concept because it is part of their personal experiences. An important criterion for developing meaningful thematic instruction is to select themes that go beyond narrow topics, like bears. However, because concepts are more abstract, it is also important to develop universal themes that are within the child's experience and can be understood and applied in concrete ways. Does this mean we give up our unit on bears? Not necessarily. Perhaps we need to reread the literature looking for universal themes and important concepts, then redesign *how* we use these books. Most of the Frank Asch books have bear characters and stories that include appropriate universal themes for young children. Even though a teacher may decide to group the books together as part of an "author focus," children can still compare and contrast the stories and the universal themes embedded

An important criterion for developing meaningful thematic instruction is to select themes that go beyond narrow topics, like bears.

in them. After reading several Frank Asch books, one first grade teacher had children record and illustrate in their journals the things Little Bear learned. Then they wrote about similar experiences in their own lives.

Along with rethinking how we use literature in terms of universal themes, we can also make natural connections to content learning. First graders who are reading "bear books" clustered around key concepts might also read nonfiction literature, learn about real bears and bear habitats. This subtopic is a natural connection and one that is part of the regular curriculum. Children can compare human families and bear families and think about things they like to do...just like bears!

Examples of Universal Themes

Universal themes cover a wide range of concepts that relate to the human experience. Themes such as Using Your Imagination or Laughing Out Loud may be light-hearted and fanciful whereas a theme like Appreciating Cultural Differences might include a broader spectrum of literature and content materials dealing with people from diverse cultures and countries.

The following universal themes are a few examples that teachers have used to connect the curriculum to students' lives:

Making Decisions
Accepting Others
Using Your Imagination
Perseverance
Facing Challenges
Daring to Dream
Blooming (Growing and Learning)
Building Personal Relationships
Appreciating Cultural Differences
Overcoming Fears
Undergoing Changes
Lending a Helping Hand
Celebrating Nature
Exploring New Frontiers
Taking Responsibility
Discoveries

Laughing Out Loud
Treasured Memories
Truth and Consequences
Showing Courage
People Who Make a Difference
Searching for Solutions
Interdependence of People and the Environment
Caring for Planet Earth
Working Together (cooperation)

Selecting Universal Themes

Selecting appropriate universal themes to develop depends on several interrelated factors. Most importantly, consider concepts children need to learn. Are they having difficulty working together? Perhaps a theme on Cooperation or Lending a Helping Hand might help them understand the importance of this concept and apply it to their daily lives.

Secondly, analyze your curriculum to find natural connections to a chosen theme. Our second grade teachers who created and developed the theme Lending a Helping Hand discovered that it incorporated many areas in the curriculum that they previously taught as separate, disconnected topics. The theme unified these areas into a more meaningful whole. For example, they were able to unify and enhance their social studies focus on friendship and families by aligning literature children were already reading including the *Frog and Toad* and the *George and Martha* stories. This theme also incorporated their science unit on The Sea as students learned how to lend a helping hand in preserving our oceans for both animals and people. Even the unit on machines, which formerly had not connected to other areas of the curriculum, made sense under Lending a Helping Hand. Children not only learned how machines worked, but also how they helped make life easier for people and communities. Literature like *Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel* and *Katy and the Big Snow* by Virginia Lee Burton proved to be natural additions in bringing the theme alive.

Another way to initiate a theme is to search for universal themes embedded in the literature you are already using or would like to use. Then begin to group related books by universal themes. When children experience several different kinds of litera-

ture with the same theme, their conceptual comprehension deepens.

In her article, "The Power of Related Books," Patricia Heine refers to a collection of related literature as a "text set," and she explains the significance of grouping such books:

> Why group books? Related books are grouped because, considered together, they are much more powerful than when considered alone. Text sets foster critical thinking. It is through the process of looking for relationships that we make connections to other stories and to our own personal stories. These new connections provide the ah-ha's so essential for growth. (1991, p. 76)

Process for Developing a Universal Theme Unit

Developing a unit based on a universal theme with the best of children's literature is *not* like writing lesson plans. Daily lesson plans are largely sequential activities usually based on a combination of published teacher's guides, available resources, children's needs, and the teacher's own ideas.

Planning a universal theme unit is a developmental process similar to the reading and writing process. There are definite stages that often overlap and which evolve as a result of preceding stages.

Stage 1: Discovering and "Themestorming"

Jane Baskwell, a teacher/consultant and author from Nova Scotia, coined the term "themestorming" in an article of the same title. She states that teachers who "themestorm" are "engaged in a planning process which will enable them to determine the potential of a particular theme, as well as provide them with a planning structure which will allow them to be flexible yet organized" (1988, p. 80).

"Themestorming" is the discovery stage when all ideas are jotted down regardless of their potential use. This process is best conducted collaboratively with other teachers who are involved in planning the same or a similar theme. As in brainstorming, two or more heads are better than one, especially when it comes to pooling a knowledge of children's literature. "The whole point of themstorming," says Baskwell, "is to bring out the many possibilities of

a theme and the more possibilities there are, the better the theme" (1988, p. 80).

According to Baskwell, two of the "vital ingredients" for a good theme are "that it be rich in literature, both fiction and nonfiction, and that it have natural connections to other areas of the curriculum" (1988, p. 80).

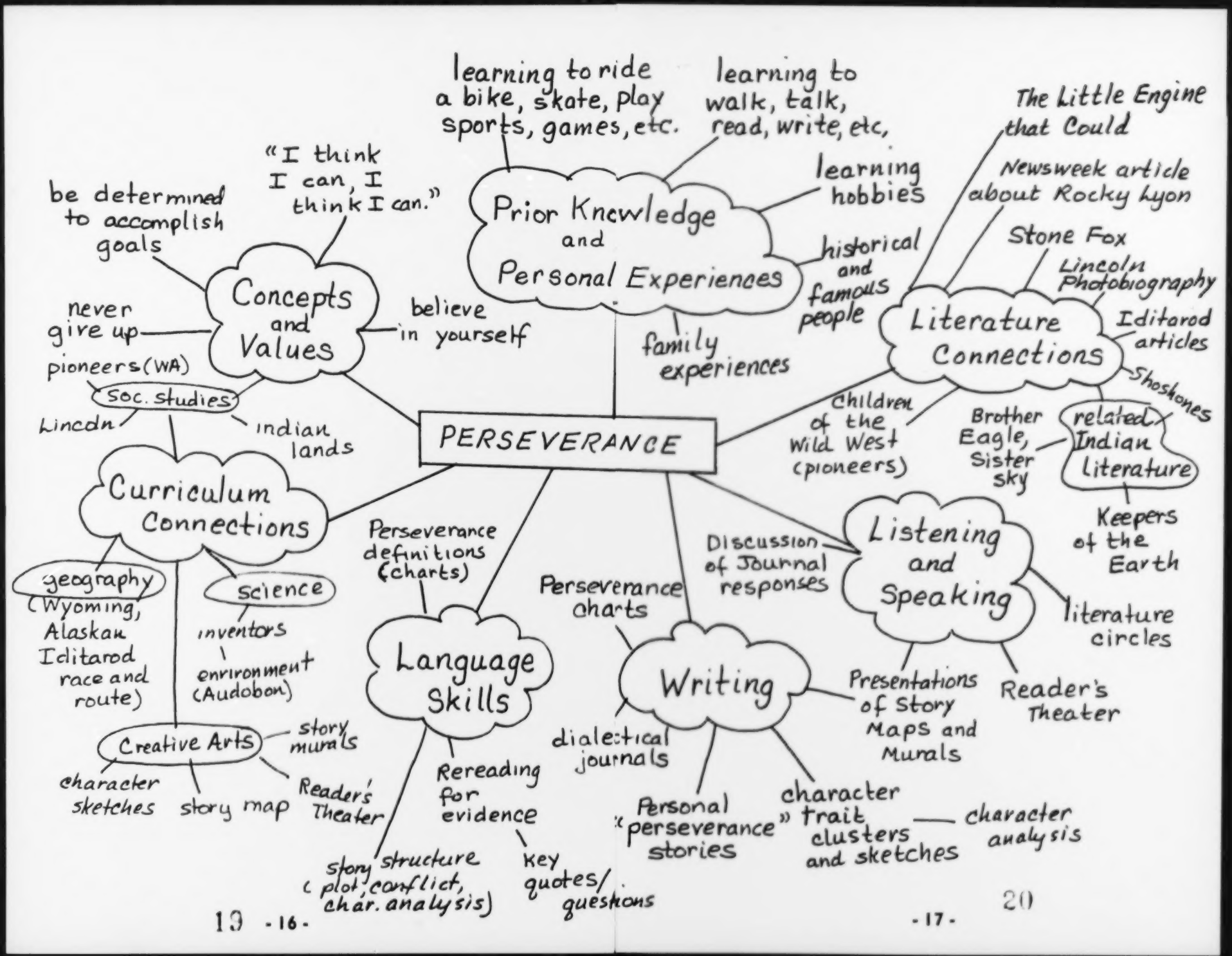
In addition to these, I believe there are other essential ingredients to consider in developing a comprehensive theme, including concepts to be learned, students' prior knowledge and personal experiences along with necessary literary skills. The themestorming cluster on the next page, which was the springboard for the perseverance theme, incorporates all of these "vital ingredients."

Stage II: Making Decisions

The next stage involves making decisions about major learning processes to incorporate in the theme unit. Learning processes go beyond discrete and often disconnected activities. They include critical skills that are interrelated and evolve developmentally such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. In developing the theme these processes should flow naturally from the content and build essential language skills in authentic learning contexts.

One of the key questions teachers can ask themselves at the initial stage of planning is "What personal connections and prior knowledge do my students have related to the theme and literature?" Before reading *Stone Fox*, for example, the children were involved in a series of prereading activities related to the theme of perseverance. The news story about Rocky Lyon provided a powerful personal connection. The students' prior knowledge of *The Little Engine That Could* helped make the true story even more meaningful. Sharing their knowledge of other people they knew who had persevered as well as their own experiences engaged these students in an authentic learning context. At the same time, it prepared them to read *Stone Fox* with more sensitivity and background knowledge. Most importantly, students were able to construct their own personal meaning from the story because they could identify with the characters and their struggles to persevere.

This kind of in-depth, personalized instruction which unfolds developmentally takes time. Baskwell suggests that teachers allow at least six to eight weeks for most themes. Of course the more complex the theme and the more connections across the


PERSEVERANCE
Prior Knowledge and Personal Experiences
learning to ride a bike, skate, play sports, games, etc.
learning to walk, talk, read, write, etc.
learning hobbies
historical and famous people
family experiences
Concepts and Values
"I think I can, I think I can."
be determined to accomplish goals
never give up
believe in yourself
pioneers (WA)
Soc. studies
Lincdn
indian lands
Literature Connections
The Little Engine that Could
Newsweek article about Rocky Lyon
Stone Fox
Lincoln Photobiography
Iditarod articles
Shoshones
Children of the Wild West (pioneers)
Brother Eagle, Sister sky
related Indian literature
Keepers of the Earth
Curriculum Connections
geography (Wyoming, Alaskan Iditarod race and route)
science
inventors
environment (Audobon)
Creative Arts
story murals
character sketches
story map
Reader's Theater
Perseverance definitions (charts)
Language Skills
story (plot, conflict, char. analysis)
structure
Rereading for evidence
key quotes/ questions
Perseverance charts
Writing
dialectical journals
Personal "perseverance" stories
character trait clusters and sketches
character analysis
Discussion of Journal responses
Listening and Speaking
literature circles
Presentations of Story Maps and Murals
Reader's Theater

curriculum, the more time is necessary for in-depth learning. Some themes, such as the one on Undergoing Changes may span an entire year.

Baskwell believes that:

> Giving a theme plenty of time to develop also allows children to become immersed in the theme, explore its many facets and experience a wide variety of literature relating to the theme. They'll have the opportunity to become experts and to share their expertise with others. If you choose a theme with a broad base, you'll increase the probability that all children will find some aspect of the theme that interests them and still be part of a community of learners with a shared experience. (1988, pp. 80-81)

Thus students become a community of learners by being involved and by making choices about their own learning at key points in the event. Minh, for example, wrote his personal perseverance story before it had been assigned because it was important to him. When planning the theme, it is best to design a flexible framework that provides a foundation for the event, but encourages student involvement, choices and decision-making.

Providing Balanced Instruction. Another key factor to consider in planning a theme is to provide balanced instruction that incorporates whole class, small group, and independent learning activities. Even though the Perseverance theme involved the whole class, students had many opportunities to engage in small cooperative group activities as well as to work independently. In addition, a variety of reading approaches contributed to student involvement and accessibility of text. Students sometimes read and responded to portions of *Stone Fox* as a whole class. At times they read and discussed the story in literature circles of five or six students. These small flexible groups were short-term and included a range of readers with varied abilities. Students also had many op-

In planning a theme, provide balanced instruction that incorporates whole class, small group, and independent learning activities.

portunities to read and reread the story independently. In this way, every child could enjoy the story and derive meaning from it.

Another important facet of the independent reading program involved students in selecting their own reading materials which might or might not be related to the theme. A variety of theme-related books pertaining to people who had persevered in some way was also available for students to read. These materials varied in degree of difficulty and included a range of genres. Students sometimes volunteered to share their independent reading books with the class.

To facilitate a balanced instructional approach, key decisions must be made in the planning stage about the range of literature to include and the purposes for using literature. The following categories have proved helpful in making these decisions:

(1) Benchmark Books

Also called core books, these are literature catalysts usually shared with the whole class to initiate a theme, to develop reading and language processes and possibly to promote content learning. Ordinarily, either a class set or a small group set of books is available for in-depth reading and responding.

(2) Literature Extensions

These are books and activities that are related to the theme in some way but are used either for small guided reading groups, informal literature circles, or for independent reading projects. A variety of literature should be available in this category including fiction, nonfiction and poetry.

(3) R&R Books (Read and Relax)

R&R books include literature to be read independently for enjoyment. Students should self-select these titles (which may or may not be theme-related). They may choose to share them voluntarily and informally. This important independent leisure reading time is sometimes referred to as SSR (sustained silent reading), DEAR (drop everything and read) or NIB (nose-in-book).

(4) Read Aloud

A teacher may choose to read a book aloud because only one copy is available, the reading level is too difficult (or too easy) for shared or independent reading or because it is simply the most ap-

propriate approach for that particular piece. Either all or a portion of a book may be read aloud. Other parts may be read using a different approach.

(5) Poetry

Poetry written by well-known authors and by students is an essential genre to include in developing a theme. Poems can often crystallize concepts through metaphor and imagery, enabling students to comprehend universal themes at deeper levels of understanding.

Sequencing Learning Processes. The final decision in planning a universal theme is to select and sequence literature and learning processes. This is easier said than done since instruction is now based on developmental learning processes, rather than upon activities. Since learning processes involve the whole child along with the developmental stages through which children naturally progress, teachers will want to plan learning sequences that mirror these processes. This means going beyond simple activities, beyond the superficial and the literal. It means capturing the conceptual, the critical and the creative levels of teaching and learning. It also means enfolding children of all abilities into the learning process, providing for different learning styles and engaging students in becoming active learners.

In applying a process approach to reading literature, learning sequences include making personal connections with students' life experiences as well as planning how to make literature accessible for all students through balanced instruction. The learning process incorporates meaningful learning activities before, during, and after reading. Responding to literature related to the theme should incorporate writing in journals or literature logs. At some point during the theme, students should be engaged in all stages of the writing process from pre-writing to publishing. Perhaps they will "publish" their learning responses through creative drama, art or by synthesizing a combination of activities as the students did in designing their *Stone Fox* story murals. Essential literacy strategies (like using meaning, structure and phonics cues in reading) should also be taught in the context of literature and language instruction when students have a purpose for learning and opportunities to use them.

Stage III: Experiencing the Process of Teaching and Learning

The final stage, of course, is to directly experience the Thematic Event with students. Even though the teacher provides the framework, the environment and the climate for learning, both teacher and students become learners. Teachers are often amazed at the depth of children's responses to the theme and the high level of learning that takes place.

Inevitably, there are adjustments and additions that may become necessary. Obtaining daily input from students about what and how they learn provides the necessary feedback for both assessing their learning and for revising instructional plans. Teachers have found it helpful to keep a "Teaching Log" for recording brief notes of effective or ineffective teaching strategies and learning outcomes, responses from students, observations, and needed adjustments. These are invaluable both as a daily resource and for future planning.

Teachers are often amazed at the depth of children's responses to the theme and the high level of learning that takes place.

In culminating a theme, plan opportunities for children to celebrate both what and how they have learned. This should be a special time when they come together as a community of learners to share projects and products as well as to evaluate the quality of their learning experiences. Often children will not realize how much they have learned and in what depth until given opportunities to think about it, express it, and hear it from others. The value of such metacognitive activities when children can think about and evaluate what they have learned cannot be over-emphasized. Such experiences build children's self-concept and give impetus to continual lifelong learning.

Even though these culminating activities may bring closure to the thematic event and the class may focus on other learning experiences or new themes, teachers are constantly amazed how past themes resurface in totally new and unplanned situations. This often happens because students have now identified with the theme. As new learning experiences unfold, new insights emerge related to the theme.

Although we initially planned the Perseverance theme for six to eight weeks, students continued to bring in news articles and personal stories related to perseverance all year. This was their testimony to us that they had internalized the true meaning of the theme and, like Rocky Lyon, had taken it beyond the classroom door into their own lives.

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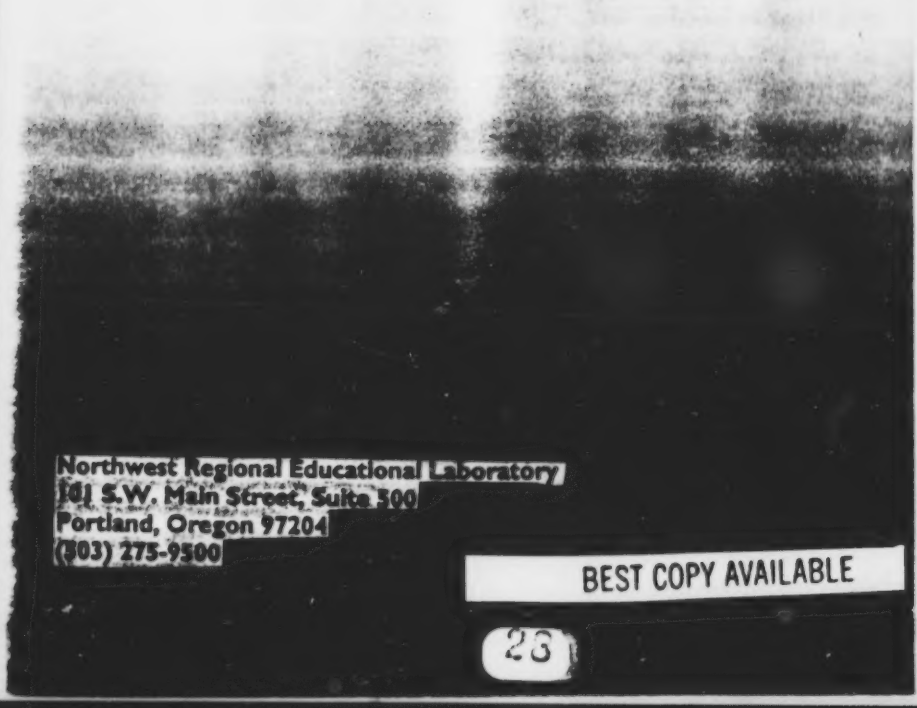

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